

Telephone interview with PhM2c Chester Fast, World War II pharmacist's mate and Bilibid POW. Conducted by Jan K. Herman, Historian, 8 February 1995. (Died 2005)

When did you get to the Philippines?

I arrived there in the middle of August 1941. There were 10 of us that were together in corps school and then we all went to Bremerton Naval Hospital together, and then we all went to the Philippines. I think there only 2 of the 10 of us still alive. Most of them were lost at Bataan or Corregidor. And then we lost another three on one of the first ships that was sunk in October 1944. Two of us got back.

What do you remember of your capture?

Even before Cavite was bombed, we evacuated patients who were on the sick list and put them in different spots--Santa Scholastica College, Sternberg Army Hospital, and a few other places depending upon their condition. I was with the group that went over with the first load.

We were at Santa Scholastica before they hit Cavite. I remember CDR [Maurice] Jose, a medical officer that had been up at Shanghai with the Marines, had been a patient of mine. When the war started, they assigned him duties. I was with him until he was lost on the *Oryoku Maru*. I was assigned an automobile and I took Jose around to different places to check on patients.

Manila had been declared an open city in December. Therefore, nothing happened. There was some shooting in the city and the Japanese were still bombing the port area during that time. On the 30th or 31st of December, the commanding officer [CAPT Robert Davis] called us all together. He said, "Our names have been turned into the Swiss consul. And we are to stay here in the compound at Santa Scholastica and if any of you leave now, I would have to consider you a deserter."

The Japanese then came in and surrounded our compound on the first day of January. So we were in the city about 3 weeks with our medical crew. We had been going to the port area because that's where the Asiatic Fleet had their medical stores and food. And we took it back to Santa Scholastica. Actually we got very little food or very little of anything from the Japanese. They just guarded us. We stayed there until they started moving us to Passy Elementary School in March and I stayed there until Corregidor fell in May. And then we went to Bilibid Prison.

You were in Bilibid until November of '43 when they grabbed you for this propaganda film detail.

Yes.

In Kentner's journal, there's an entry for 8 November which says, "Corregidor movie detail left Bilibid. How many of you did they take?"

I think they sent about a hundred of us.

How did they make the selection?

I think Hayes made the choice of what corpsmen would go. The 10 corpsmen who went were part of a headquarters group, more or less. Jim Bray played the part of Skinny Wainwright. They put it on a voluntary basis and Hayes wrote something about the fact that we were forced to do this.

Yes. I have what he wrote right here. Hayes noted that "Their service records would note they did not volunteer for this picture which will be used for propaganda purposes against their own country." What do you remember about the day you went on that detail?

We all went over on a boat. Most of the guards had been around us for some time. There were about eight of them for each group. When we arrived at Corregidor and got off, we went up on one of the roofs of one of the tunnels. I knew nothing about Corregidor because I had never been there before. We were standing there when a Japanese officer came up to us and in perfect English said, "Hi guys, how are you doing?" We found out that he had been to school somewhere in the Los Angeles area. He had gone back to Japan to visit his grandparents when the war started. He told us the only way he could get out of the war was to join their so-called USO. And he was the star of the film. And the director was educated and worked in Hollywood. That's all we knew about him.

Then, of course, we went back to Bilibid.

Were they working from a script?

They had a script. They had us lined up in the tunnels. They had a group coming out of the tunnel. They had someone come out and jump in the car. I drove off with them, not very far, of course. They filmed that. They had the surrender of the flag, where we all marched up with the flag and met the Japanese officers.

You said that Mr. Bray had been designated to be General Wainwright.

Yes. He was in the scene and I was with him.

Did they put him in a general's uniform?

They had uniforms for us and everything. They gave us khakis to put on.

Did they have a lot of extras on the scene to come out of the tunnel?

That's it. That's why they had the hundred of us there. I don't know how they kept track of everybody because there were very few guards; it was very loose. There were no threats or anything like that.

Did they have to do more than one take on some of the scenes?

One scene where the Japanese actor and whoever was following him. where he was coming across some water area. They had a little creek. And they all kinds of little bombs or whatever they used for effects, exploding as he came over. You could see the water spray and so-forth. That was the only action involved.

So there was some level of expertise on their part, as far as knowing how to put a film together.

Oh, sure. The actor was good. And the director apparently knew what he was doing. It wasn't a slipshod job by any means. They had the dynamite set to explode at the proper time. At one point they had a bunch of us running out of one of the caves. I was standing in the cave with a rifle. And one of the other time, I was driving the big limousine. And another time I was a major assigned to Skinny Wainwright surrendering the flag.

There was quite a writeup on this in the old Liberty magazine, which is long gone away. I saw it in 1947 or 1948. It explained how the film was made.

You were given the role of Wainwright's chauffeur.

Yes. And his assistant on the surrender. Faces didn't make any difference to them.

Before they shot a scene, did they run you through a few practice sessions first?

Yes. And after we left Corregidor, they had

They would tell you what the scene was supposed to look like, then you would rehearse it several times until they were happy with it, and then they would film it. So, you had a scene where you were all coming out of the tunnel, then you went over to a flagpole.

No. The flag was carried out of the tunnel. Of course, we had to speak English. What ever they said was in their language. The only reason I know the movie was shown was because a guard saw me and apparently recognized me. He said "Ah, cinema, cinema." And then other guards told me they had seen me in it. So, we know it was shown to our guards. I never did see it.

How long were you on Corregidor?

About a total of two nights and three days. And then we went down to the studio in Manila a few times to do a conference scene. They brought in special food for us and we were treated all right. And we got to watch what was going on. Of course, my attitude was, anytime I could get out of camp and go on a working party, I'd go. It was my recreation. And that's all there was to it. The film actually focused on the hero of the Japanese army making his landings and his accomplishments. And then we were just barely brought in.

I was corpsman on the SOQ and of course we had a 24-hour watch. There was a guy who never wanted to go so he would take my place on the ward and I would take his place and go out on working parties.

Hayes kept about 20 hospital corpsmen who he called on first to go on working parties. It would mean like going out to do something for the guards or doing a repair. He did that to protect the patients that weren't as physically able as we were. We were fairly healthy. At Passy, a merchant would come into the camp

When we got to Bilibid they arranged for us to start receiving pay living up to certain phases of the Geneva Convention for noncombatants. Because I was low man on the totem pole, I got something like 25 centavos a day. I received more than that but I had a little tab with my name on it about the size of a little cigarette lighters. They told us the rest of our salary would go to a bank in Tokyo and we would get it after the war was over. It was phony paper money, the value of it. For 10 centavos we could buy a pound of sugar to begin with. By the time the war was over a pound of sugar was worth about 300 pesos.

You were on the *Oryoku Maru*?

Yes.